

# The Role of Hospice Nurse

## How Death Brings About a Greater Appreciation of Life

By Kathryn Norcutt

I saw Agnes, one of my first hospice patients, die before my eyes. It sounds more dramatic than it actually was. There was no last minute speech peppered with coughs, or a slow death. It was more like one minute she was there, and the next you could just tell she wasn't. Agnes had terminal breast cancer, which she had beaten six years earlier and then, all too quickly, it resurfaced. She decided not to go through with any treatment and enjoy what life she had left. I was there in her last month or so of life to handle her quality of life, and it disappoints me to know that such a wonderful spark of life had been snuffed when she still had years left, especially a fighter like her.

It was because of her that I became acquainted with the same phrase I now see many hospice organizations use on their sites: "*When you cannot add days to your life, add life to your days.*" Many nurses who find themselves in a hospice care setting strive to help those who have terminal illnesses, live by this notion. As nurses, we want to help people not only survive longer, but our ultimate goal is to help people leave this world feeling fulfilled, not regretful or bitter. Death is a natural part of life, and we must help people prepare for that reality. People who are faced with a terminal illness know their time is limited. And depending on the individual's perspective, this can be viewed as a blessing or a curse. A hospice nurse works to help people view the terminal phase as a second opportunity to accomplish unfinished goals and develop a passionate appreciation for life instead of feeling defeated.

- **Helping with Life Decisions:** In some cases, this may not be possible. People who must make decisions on behalf of those with dementia or mental handicaps will be the ones to make these tough choices. However, patients who are able to express their concerns should understand that their decisions are respected. By choosing hospice care, they have already made the biggest and most difficult decision, one of forgoing progressive medical treatments. But there are still many other decisions they must make. These can be everything from what they want to wear or eat, to taking on new hobbies. A person may want to learn a new language, plant a garden, write a book or follow other dreams. Nurses are there to help and encourage them. Along with encouraging goals and activities, nurses encourage proper pain management to make fulfillment of these goals a reality.
- **Providing Comfort and Dignity:** Overall, the main goal of hospice care is to provide comfort. However, physical comfort comes in different forms for different people. There is no program for pain management that is universally best for everyone. For pain management, the [University of Minnesota](#) suggests identifying the location, frequency, severity and type of pain for a patient. A caring nurse will also investigate further into what worsens or improves the degree of pain for each individual. Nurses will ask questions frequently to help people work with their doctors in finding the best solutions for this issue. Chronic pain can be the biggest deterrent in achieving quality care. A competent hospice nurse will understand that the people they care for cannot fully enjoy the rest of their lives with pain standing in the way.
- **Listening with Compassion and Respect:** Terminal illnesses bring with them a wide spectrum of emotions for both patients and their family members. As [Stanford Medicine Cancer Institute](#)

points out, hospice is a type of palliative care that encompasses many aspects. Spiritual, cultural, physical and emotional needs must all be met. To do this, nurses evaluate each client's mood, behavior and physical health. By talking with people about their concerns, fears and frustrations, nurses can help make their patients' final months more fulfilling. Since hospice involves many other types of caregivers, nurses will help patients meet their unique needs by utilizing all professionals involved.

- **Family First:** When visiting a home, nurses must always remember that the client's family members or companions are the main caregivers. They are there constantly, and caring for a loved one who is dying is one of the most difficult experiences they will ever face. It is a hospice nurse's job to provide emotional encouragement and listen to the family's concerns. If the main caregivers do not have the support they need, they cannot provide the necessary support their terminal loved ones need.

While some hospice nurses are found locally, many travel the country to work in different places and help as many people as possible. In some cases, a hospice nurse may have fought with or survived a life-threatening illness on their own, which allows them to draw upon such knowledge when it comes to caring for others with terminal conditions. Because of this, most hospice nurses develop a sense of appreciation for the value of life.

A hospice nurse is that very special person who helps those who may have limited time available, still live each day to the fullest.

**About the Author:** *After many years of working in the healthcare field, [Kathryn Norcutt](#) now has a passion for sharing her knowledge by writing for sites like RNnetwork, a company that specializes in travel nursing. Her insights about [travel nursing agencies](#) are well researched and backed by knowledge and experience. In her free time, she loves to work at perfecting her strength and fluidity in her Vinyasa yoga.*